

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Stitching People Together: The Art of Cross-Cultural Encounters in an Embroidery Workshop

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This article discusses how to live with differences while maintaining differences in an international embroidery workshop in Tromsø, Norway. It explores the role of art in enabling interactions between strangers, showing how individuals become part of collectives and facilitate social change. This collaboration between artist and researcher draws on data from arts-based participant observations and qualitative interviews. The analysis shows how embroidery practices, materials, and the expression of the embroideries create a space affording integrative encounters between strangers, easing the interaction which neither presupposes nor asks for similarities, or aims for strong interpersonal relations. We find that difference is the material through which encounters are made. The embroidering and the workshop create a space owned by no one with no majorities or minorities, where all possess differences but do not produce “otherness.” Participants remain different, yet connect and transform, while demonstrating the possibilities of impersonal cross-cultural encounters.

Keywords: Arts; Co-production; Differences; Similarities; Encounters; Integrating interaction

Introduction

Societies are made up of collectives of individuals being both similar and different in relation to each other. However, nations and collectives commonly continue to build on perceived similarities and an “imaginary that each society exists as a homeland with its own people” (Simmel 1908/1950: 1). Such ideas explicitly exclude the stranger since the stranger personifies not belonging to this homeland and, hence, difference, rather than perceived similarity. Simmel (1908/1950: 402) depicts the stranger as the “person that comes today and stays tomorrow.” The stranger then is a stranger based on “the fact that he has not belonged [to the group] from the beginning” (Simmel 1908/1950: 402). This makes the “stranger” a relational concept (Koefoed & Simonsen 2011), describing the one who comes in relation to those already there, closely connected to the place where they meet and stay. The stranger

hence brings qualities to the group that are different from those already existing, by coming from outside, from somewhere else. Some of these differences are exactly what make the stranger an unique individual, who, in order to be granted the right to belong as an individual, must be allowed these differences. This reading makes the intrinsic relationship between difference, individuality, and belonging visible. Increased mobility and migration have made modern societies more ethnically complex, becoming “gatherings of strangers – home grown and migrant” as Amin (2012) says. These diverse societies need to deal with difference and form communities in ways that acknowledge ethnic diversity and work with, not against, difference. The arts have the potential to spur engagement, negotiations, contestations, and belonging (Sonn & Baker 2016). Both arts and arts-based research have ambitions to “disrupt dominant narratives and challenge biases” (Leavy 2015: 17) and allow for “moments of discovery and imagination” (Kinkaïd 2019: 251). This may create emotional connections beyond “simply understanding the issue,” which often is not enough to change behavior (Kinkaïd 2019: 247) or allow for new thoughts, since art encourages dialog and understanding (Nunn 2017; Alfreðs & Åberg 2017). Hence, we study socially involved art’s potential to make changes (Beuys & Harland 2007).

This article asks how can we deal with and facilitate interactions and the forming of collectives that acknowledge, allow for, and work with difference through art. We analyze this by exploring a series of embroidery workshops run by the embroidery artist Marsil Andelov Al-Mahamid, initiated by him and researcher Marit Aure—the authors of this article. The embroidery workshops are designed as a planned, “engineered” (Mayblin, Valentine & Andersson 2016) social experiment, action research, and art initiative, trying to create encounters between strangers and enable transformations compromising new experiences, emerging thoughts about how to live with differences, and thereby social integration. Artist and activist Joseph Beuys calls this a “social sculpture” (Beuys & Harland 2007) and this is also how Al-Mahamid, sees the embroidery workshop. This article analyzes the role of embroidery in enabling encounters between participants who are strangers to each other and explore how diverse individuals may form collectives while maintaining differences.

The following sections present the study’s theoretical and analytical approach, our participatory art, and action research, before we explore and analyze the embroidery workshop. The final section sums up the key findings.

Theoretical and Analytical Approaches

How are modern heterogeneous societies held together? Amin (2012: 1) frames this question as how to live with difference and transform from the singular and individual to the plural and collective. He suggests that diverse societies should not be based on feelings of similarity, yet, many collectives are based on ideas of similar backgrounds, experiences, and aims. Socialism, feminism, and postcolonialism build communities across differences but paradoxically are also founded on common grounds, like class, gender, ethnicity, or common politics to remove suppression based on such distinctions. Even anti-essentialist thinkers, such as Haraway (1988), focus on where we are going, rather than where we come from, which creates a common aim for people to gather around. This common aim becomes the basis, whereas differences become less discussed (Amin 2012). Even the very framing of the need for recognition of differences somehow accepts the paradox that the “‘right to be different’ – relies on dominant [common] norms that necessitate a call for recognition in the first place” (Gressgård & Jensen 2016: 3), which implicitly excludes differences. This often hides differences, since the logic in communities of similarity is that the stranger will have to blend in and become similar. Another approach avoiding to relate to differences holds that people may look and behave differently but are basically the same. Gullestad (2002) showed that

Norwegians tend to conflate sameness with equality. This is mostly done unintentionally, in order to be treated and seen as equals, people are considered as same (Gullestad 2002). Thus, sameness becomes a condition for equality, whereas differences become underplayed or even denied. Wise (2013: 37) states that communities cannot rest [on] “nationhood” or “we-ness” as it has been traditionally understood, because it “inevitably involves modes of inclusion and exclusion.” Such understandings miss the opportunity to handle differences and leave us to deal with difference at a personal level (Amin 2012). They require personal “tolerance” for difference. Yet, if diversity is the new normal (Taşan-Kok et al. 2017) and we are all strangers, it becomes impossible to base community formation and handling of difference on tolerance: strong ties cannot encompass that many strangers. The challenge is, thus, to live with difference and form communities of strangers beyond personal relations. However, racial (or ethnic) difference per se does not create exclusion. According to Solomos (2013: 20), “racial differences are made meaningful and significant not because they exist but because their existence has become socially and politically inscribed and coded.” Difference could hence be studied as the inscription of meaning to differences and race, scrutinizing how they are made significant (Yuval-Davies 2006). Amin’s approach is to search for new ways to live with differences, which does not consider ethnic difference a danger to social cohesion. Although societies and authorities “redress conflict between strangers through political programs designed to foster interpersonal ties; he [Amin] argues, controversially, for a politics of the impersonal which emphasises the development of an ethics of respectful distance in collective use of the commons” according to Noble (2013: 31). The embroidery workshop may be seen as planned experiment in such impersonal encounters. The aim of the workshop is not to make friends and interpersonal close ties but to create a kind of public room where strangers may meet and use the room together at a respectful distance.

The concept of *encounters* aims to understand how strangers form, become part of, and transform cross-cultural collectives. Whereas people born into a community become part of the commons through socialization and internalization of norms and values, Amin (2012) argues that living together as strangers requires the processes of integration that allows and builds on differences. This can be studied as negotiations of ethnic difference in social encounters (Amin 2002: 959; Førde 2019) and hence encompass “the range of meetings from the coming together of opposing forces, through routine everyday contacts and meetings where differences are noteworthy to the coming together of different bodies that also make (a) difference” (Wilson 2016: 14). Amin (2002) suggests to initiate and analyze purposeful organized group activities, because if the interaction is already segregated they hold no potential for showing how to live with differences. To develop new understandings we need “careful studies of whether, how and what kinds of encounters that occur, the different ways in which encounters come to matter” (Valentine & Sadgrove 2012: 2050) and concrete explorations (Mayblin, Valentine & Andersson 2016). This necessitates a move from programs designed to foster interpersonal strong ties to a politics of impersonal respectful distance (Amin 2012), which potentially “breaks down prejudices” and “changes values and translates beyond specificities of the individual moment” (Valentine 2008: 325). Integration then becomes a process of change, where creating something new requires changing the parts *and* the whole. This invites studying integration through the change that participatory art may afford (Askins & Pain 2011: 803). Beuys sees art *as* social change; pointing to art’s potential to mobilize engagement and promote transformation (Beuys & Harlan 2007). Marsil Al-Mahamid shares this approach, which inspired the embroidery workshop. “Social sculpture” is useful theoretically here because it highlights how art enables or *is* change. Sacks (2016: x) describes the social sculpture as Beuys’ strategy to “mobilize us internally, to disrupt and to ‘scratch on the imagination’ [...],

enabling us to become internally active and engaged". Participatory artwork, art practice aiming for disturbances and political propositions, as in our case, invites new thoughts on differences and community. The embroidery workshop enables free embroidery among strangers and is an artwork exploring the "relationship between the experimental and transformative social processes" (Sacks 2016: ix), which may produce alternative ways of knowing (Nunn 2017).

The role of the arts in transforming the individual to the collective in communities of strangers also has a material side. Amin "maintains that our attachments to social life are formed not only through the 'freight of social ties', but also through the relations we develop with the non-human, material world of objects and spaces" (Noble 2013). This includes soundscapes and the size, form, and configuration of space (Mayblin et al. 2015). Inspired by theories of 'affordance' (Gibson 1979/2014), the embroidery workshop forms a multilingual cultural and material space that offers specific possibilities for action (Aronin & Laoire 2013), which, like the furnishings of a room, affords some actions more than others, yet allows alternative usages. This invites emphasizing how the physical, social, and cultural environments enable certain interactions (Gibson 1979/2014). It stresses both the factual and imagined in physical, social, and cognitive situations (Aronin & Laoire 2013) bringing forth the conditions for integrative interaction while highlighting how the material carries layers of meanings.

Wilson (2016) warns that qualifying encounters as meaningful does not imply that they are positive or should be taken for granted. We explore the *process* rather than taking the *outcome* for granted, study the doing of encounters as "momentary enactments and rhythms of difference" (Wilson 2016: 14), and ask *how* the embroidery workshop facilitates integrative encounters of difference (Mayblin, Valentine & Winiarska 2016: 12). Arts-based research projects have been criticized for "serv[ing] to connect conscious supporters of the arts – they became 'fictitious harmonious communities' that did not replicate real world encounters" (Bishop 2004: 79). We find that as a deliberate social art experiment to interrogate integrative encounters, art-projects may prove useful—strangers actually meet and interact. The embroidery case is thus not an example of a successful activity but an experiment to explore. Combining approaches of encounters (Amin 2002) and how the arts may transform society (Beuys & Harland 2007), we study the affordances (Gibson 1979/2014) of the embroidery workshop and the spaces of opportunities the sewing, the material, the thread, and the content of the embroideries create.

Based on these approaches we distinguish between three analytical aspects, working together in practice: (1) Embroidery as a practice: how does sewing and the embroidery workshop afford interaction; (2) the meaning of the material: how do the needle and thread carry meanings and how may this enable interaction; and (3) how does the creative expression of the embroidery and artwork invite interaction? The analyses follow this structure and start with embroidering in the workshop. We then present the material room of opportunity and the creative expression of the embroidery. The transformations and the social sculptures will be discussed along these themes before summarizing the empirical and theoretical findings and discussing if this can be transferable to other situations.

Method and Context of Research: Participatory Art and Co-production

This case study combines action and arts-based research aiming at changing social reality (Askins & Pain 2011; Kindon et al. 2007; Sonn & Baker 2016). The art practices we have initiated become a mode to produce, collect, and analyze empirical data (Nunn 2017).

In the fall of 2017, embroidery artist Marsil started an embroidery workshop in collaboration with social researcher Marit as part of the research project Sustainable Diverse, Cities:

Innovation in Integration (Cit-egration).¹ The workshop was co-funded by the Arts Council Norway. It is both an art project and an arts-based research approach exploring the role of participatory art in enabling encounters, inspired by Askins and Pains' (2011) participatory art project with young people with African and British background in northeast England. They explored how spaces of interaction may enable meaningful encounters between different social groups in a youth club. In our case, once a month at 6 pm, 15–20 people were invited to the artists' atelier at the regional arts center in Tromsø. Marsil greeted and introduced people to each other as they arrived. Without further introduction he invited the participants to choose a black or white piece of fabric and helped us to put it in an embroidery frame. He asked people to draw a sketch or just to start (free) embroidering. The atelier turned into an embroidery workshop where seven to ten people with diverse ethnic backgrounds meet, embroider, and often return regularly. These monthly workshops are a case for understanding some of the enabling conditions for cross-cultural encounters and how to live with difference. Before entering the workshop we briefly situate this study in previous research.

Marsil has used embroidery in his socially involved art in exhibitions, performances, and workshops with youths, refugees, and others, in several projects.² Together with researcher Marit he developed the open embroidery workshop (see **Figure 1**) as part of a research project, which we analyze here. Embroidery has otherwise been used in art therapy, especially with refugee women (Hanania 2020), and in art projects, which seeks to raise awareness on politics and “people who differ” (Hauan not dated: 8), which explores the role of art by inviting people in different places to embroider (on) a 10-meter long table cloth (Jónsdóttir not



Figure 1: Embroidery workshop, in the atelier. Photo: Marsil Andjelov Al-Mahamid.

¹ Research Council Norway 270649.

² <http://marsilandjelovalmahamid.com/index.php/videophotography/>.

dated). Embroidery has also been used as a tool for language and heritage learning in extra curriculum activities, such as a project for Bengali girls in London which also “interrogate the unexpectedness of [...] encounters” (Macleroy & Shamsad 2020: 483). Embroidery artist Vestby (2015) has explored the role of embroidery in identity formation when using embroidering to engage youth in the development of urban spaces in Oslo (Tolstad, Hagen & Andersen 2019). Embroidery are hence part of the material turn in migration studies (Macleroy & Shamsad 2020) paralleling the “social turn” in art practices and socially involved art, which are often collaborative and participatory (Hickey-Moody, 2017). Yet studies using embroidery in migration contexts are rare (Hanania 2020).

Marsil with a MA in entrepreneurship and BA in arts, as a co-producer of knowledge (Cahill 2007), has organized and hosted the workshops for two-and-a-half years. Marit has attended 13 workshops throughout the period, staying for an hour and 30 minutes to four hours and 30 minutes each time as a participant, researcher, and the PI of the Cit-egration project. She took notes from the workshops and conversations with Marsil during the planning and running of the workshops. As a supplement to the participant workshop observations, she interviewed two participants for two hours and two-and-a-half hours, respectively. He has a Serbian and Syrian background and moved to Tromsø from Serbia in 2009. Marit is Norwegian and moved to Tromsø 30 years ago. This analysis is the result of our collaborative work and long common analytical discussions also involving Sirkka Seljevold—from Finland—who participated in most workshops and has co-authored a Norwegian chapter on the encounters in the embroidery workshop (Aure, Al-Mahamid & Seljevold 2021). Involving the artists, the researchers, organizers, and participants, this is a participatory collaborative endeavor. The authors have both added theoretical perspectives, analytical points, and have co-written the article. Marsil analyzed his experiences from a position of a participating organizer and artist of socially involved art, Marit as a social researcher. We have analyzed experiences, observations, and other data from the ongoing workshops thematically. By working iteratively with the data we found the concepts of *encounters*, *affordance*, *socially involved art*, and *social sculpture* (which will be presented later) fruitful in making sense of various aspects of the interaction in the workshop. The article mainly analyzes the workshop based on our perspectives on the interaction, less on other participants' experiences and evaluations. Experiences from public seminars, conversations with municipality administration, voluntary organizations, exhibitions, and vernissages, all inform the study and are part of this co-production of knowledge (Bergold & Thomas 2012; Kindon et al. 2007).

More than 500 people from over 30 countries, aged between 15 and 65 years old, have participated in the workshops (2017–2020), with some having returned at least once and others returning several times. Participants were recruited mainly through Marsil's job in the healthcare system and his voluntarism in humanitarian organizations. These people received a personal invitation, but there were also open invitations on Facebook, and printed invitations in local shops. People confirmed their attendance to Marsil, which provided him with the number of participants—important, as the studio can only host around 15 people. The participants were almost exclusively people that had moved to Tromsø either from other places in Norway or other countries. They had been living in Tromsø from a few weeks to decades. Most arrived as students, as family members, for work, as refugees, or for marriages. There was no expectation that the participants must regularly attend the workshops. The participants stayed in the atelier as long as they wanted, sometimes until midnight. They could embroider steadily and energetically, a little or often. The workshop brought together diverse migrants and Norwegians in Tromsø in a multicultural and multilingual setting, with an equal number of women and men. As it turned out, there were always people with more than three different ethnic backgrounds present in the workshop, which, except from Marsil

and Marit, are ordinary participants. Usually there were more people with immigrant backgrounds present than ethnic Norwegians.

The research is approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data and all participants were informed about the research, while their participation in the workshop did not depend on participating in the research. Participants are anonymized in the text and consent for using pictures obtained specifically. Throughout the years only one person has refrained to participate in the research. Although informing participants about the research often felt a bit odd and disrupted the interaction in the workshop, it also led to numerous discussion about the concept and content of “integration,” what embroidery does, on migration and belonging, and the interaction in the workshop, central to this analysis. Because people voluntarily took part in the workshop, and often returned again to the workshop, the discussions implicitly rest on the premise that the workshops are somehow valuable. More than in most fieldwork situations the researcher and artist influenced the workshop interaction, by planning, funding, and running this workshop, thus this is by no means a neutral evaluation of the workshop—if anything like that exists—rather it is an exploration of this specific situation.

Embroideries and Encounters; Analysis

What kind of encounters and interaction do the workshops afford?

At the Embroidery Workshop

Abdalla is 35 years old of Middle Eastern background and comes regularly to the workshop. Once he came tired and said: “there aren’t many places you can just meet others.” He was studying Norwegian language and was frustrated that he did not meet any Norwegians and hence lacked opportunities for practicing. “No one wants to talk to you; no one is interested,” he continued and sat down under the pitched roof. He lifted his embroidery slightly before putting it away and asks rhetorically, “if you just sit on the couch in the little rented apartment, eat popcorn and watch American movies, what kind of life is that? Norwegians have enough with themselves.” In an interview he said that he is not really interested in embroidery, although the embroidery he works on is important to him. Back in the atelier, the day of the outburst, he explains how he worries for his mother and family back home as there have been bomb strikes nearby. He explains how lacking language skills prevents him from making friends, being able to share these worries, and adds that the embroidering partly provides such a space. A Norwegian young man joins in the conversation in the atelier and adds that he also comes to the workshop to meet people, admitting his loneliness.

Abdalla slowly calms down this day in the atelier, gets some tea, and asks how some words are pronounced and practical questions about life in the winter city. We start exchanging words and everyday practicalities, yet the war experiences and concerns for loved ones—for most, only vicariously—are still with us. Another refugee shares Abdalla’s experience that Norwegians only care about themselves and are uninterested in war and politics abroad. People across nationalities enter the conversation and oppose or agree. The workshop interaction displays how loneliness and the challenge of establishing friendships as newcomers are experienced across ethnicities and show the importance of emotions in encounters between strangers (Askins & Pain 2011; Aure, Førde & Brox Liabo 2020; Wilson 2013). The embroidery workshop offers a space and forms a community that meets some of these needs, yet also invites other desires. A Finnish woman tells in an interview that her interest in handicraft brought her to the workshop, yet when she learned that she would not develop her embroidery skills here as she had anticipated, she actually does not know why she continuously return, but clearly this space offer something to her. We find that motivation for entering the workshop varies and is not necessarily a shared interest, as Mayblin, Valentinee,

and Winiarska (2016) suggest. The art practice rather represents a fuzzy open space enabling unknown, unspecified encounters.

Most participants have not embroidered since their schooldays. This spurs talk about school systems but also how some had to leave school because of war. The bodily experience of embroidery may evoke both “ordinary” memories and traumas, as shown in art therapy (Hanania 2020). Sander had just started university when he fled. Another man was about to start further education after some years of work; now he is unable to use neither his education nor experience in a new country. Backgrounds become relevant and shareable in multiple ways. Some share personal stories, some talk about childhood or education in general, and the workshop seems to invite both light and deep conversations that promote “fleeting encounters” (Peterson 2017) across ethnic distinctions and migrant backgrounds.

Embroidering practice brings about themes for conversation. A Syrian refugee talks about warm memories of his granny, whereas a Swiss woman briefly mentions bad memories from schooldays, before continuing to talk about her joy of handicraft. Vestby (2015), in a youth project using embroidery as a method to map belonging, portrays this as embroidery’s ability to bring forth the places people “hold in their hearts” (Tolstad, Hagen & Andresen 2017). Embroidering and the intrinsic reflections demonstrate what Aronin (2014: 189) describes as materialities having the possibilities to “cause patriotic feelings and awareness of one’s origins; others foster attachment to other countries.” At some level, and among some of the participants, new experiences of community emerge maybe a “social sculpture” (Beuys & Harland 2007), by being part of a participatory piece of transformative performance art. Although negotiating differences and similarities (Mayblin et al. 2015; Gressgård & Jensen 2016) make for important encounters, the interaction in the workshops also visualizes how participants attune to the situation (Brown 2012). They share memories that the workshop can handle.

First-time participants do not necessarily know how to embroider. Marsil stays cool: the important thing is not to make the thread too long, just make the needle go through the fabric, up and down, up and down, yet people still do not know what this is all about. Marsil asks participants to sew something associated with “home.” Worries disappear; this is not a contest and embroidery art is not about being good at it. Community forms by relieved participants. Nobody asks what others are embroidering now; the space allows the insecurity to be handled individually. Art introduces something unknown and brings people out of their comfort zone. For Beuys and Harland (2007), this opens up a space for transformation. Most participants, including Marit, who is also new to this, do not seem to find this threatening; it rather leaves the participants in a similar state, on equal footing in doing something unfamiliar, yet is nothing at stake. Marsil keeps an eye on everybody, walks over to those who need help or want to learn stitches. His movements ensure people feel welcome, draw us into the conversation and the embroidering, and add dynamics and a friendly ambience. Marsil’s chosen quiet and light Serbian and Cuban “embroidery music” also negotiates the unfamiliarity and adds qualities that contribute to making this a safe space, conditioning shared experiences (Bergold & Thomas 2012; Mayblin, Valentine & Anderson 2016).

Embroidering makes a man from the Middle East remember how this was always an elderly women’s handicraft, confirmed by other participants, also shown in studies (Vestby 2015; Hanania 2020). Somebody asks Marsil why he embroiders, and he explains about soft tactile textiles and the simple yet three-dimensional effect. In Serbia, however, embroidery is not just a women’s activity. A man that embroiders would often be considered gay, in a derogative way. A discussion on gay rights follows with some disagreements. However, it is possible to talk about this without making “too” strong opposing positions, before the conversation divides into several threads. Embroidering is slow, repetitive, and meditative, and does not

invite hard voices, rather contemplation. It produces kindness, closeness, and recognition says embroidery artist Vestby (2015), explaining how the breath aligns with the slow motion of the stitches. Does this make it personal, or is it possible that this kind of closeness relates more to the embroidery and the respectfulness and impersonal ties than personal ones? Stitching takes time and in line with Askins and Pain (2011) we suggest that the actual practice of artwork influences the form and contents of the interaction. Some find this relaxing, others not. It adds duration and rhythm to the encounters and promises that if you want, you can stay on and return. Contrary to encounters planned for the aim of friendship, the workshops will continue regardless of the forming of strong ties. The practice of embroidering allows small conversations and helps overcome language barriers that otherwise make it difficult to sustain conversation, or forces conversations to end because you run out of possible themes to talk about. We argue that embroidering has the potential to sooth the oddities of social relations among strangers, by inviting easy and concrete dialogs, yet also affords more demanding conversations.

“Why come here and complain about everything that is wrong in Norway,” a Syrian asks. To him life is much better in Norway than in war-ridden Syria. Many participants agree and around the table we try to make sense of this. Maybe some complain because they live under pressure in a new place, someone offers. Some think complaining makes migrants seem ungrateful. The Syrian man says they should leave. Others disagree: can’t one criticize when you live in a different country than you were born? What about democratic rights? Again, the conversation feeds on differences, and opinions vary across, rather than along ethnic and migrant backgrounds. The rounds of presentations conducted every time a new participant enters and visualizes a similar point. A woman of Ukrainian background, which used to live in another city and travels extensively, knows the region better than most, regardless of ethnicity. A young Muslim woman in hijab came to Tromsø from North Africa with her family who fled when she was a baby. She is the only participant who has lived most of her life in Tromsø. Her story makes this part of the international Tromsø visible to fellow participants. The German and the Norwegian architects learn about the Spanish researchers, the Kurdish engineer who is also a refugee, and the Finnish and Latvian artists. This mix of people demonstrates and normalizes diversity. Similarities and differences do not add up here; they intersect and mix in various nongiven ways (Yuval-Davies 2006). The conversations suggest that differences are neither static nor deterministic, yet they matter, and offer varied positions and senses of belonging. Differences are the material these conversation are made of, but they blur distinctions as much as they create new ones. The interaction in the embroidery workshop questions predefined categories and displays their fluidity and how experiences transcend ethnic backgrounds. Workshop conversations about such issues suggest that these experiences are new to us, and hence change our thinking.

Many conversations brought about in the presentation rounds revolve around Kven³ and Sami culture because one of the regulars present themselves as working in a Kven organization. These conversations show that Norway has always been an ethnically diverse nation. Although this surprises many migrants that were unfamiliar with Sami and Kven ethnicities, it also challenges the positioning of Norway as a homogeneous nation, to which migrants become the different “other.” It invites dialogs on how we cannot know who are part of the majority or the minority, and it demonstrates that these are also unstable categories (Berg, Flemmen & Gullikstad 2010). In the workshop, the dichotomization and hierarchy of positioning groups are questioned, When exploring such multi-threaded lines of origin

³ Early Finnish immigrants to Norway in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

and settlement, opportunities to talk about places (home), including how people differ, also occur. In these situations, difference tends to be framed as variations rather than as opposites, maybe negotiated by the fact that all participants are strangers, different to each other?

Embroidery as Materiality

The talk goes around and over the circular table filled with embroidery flosses and yarn in different colors, unfinished embroideries, chalk, needles, and the similar. This creative mess is a good inspiration and a good distraction. Marsil's objects are stored around the studio and tell of finished and ongoing art practices and generate emotional and cognitive stimuli. A collection of WWII books and art magazines are placed on a table. The room holds a working station, tools, and parts of a big wooden sculpture. A small table with snacks and drinks is placed under the roof. A pair of old skies and two irons are stacked away. As shown in other studies, the configuration of the room and furniture matters, including soundscapes and ambience (Mayblin et al. 2015). The "embroidery music" and why this works for embroidery are recurrently discussed among the participants. People agree that serving tea and coffee makes a welcoming atmosphere and allows for exchanging habits of tea drinking and the words for biscuits and fruits in Norwegian and other languages, making conversations easy and "accessible." It invites everyone's contributions because they know different languages and have different experiences to offer. Such conversations also reveal that knowledge is situational; most inhabitants born in Norway do not know that you need a social security number to order an electricity connection.

The conversations gain by difference; they are invited by and conditioned by difference, rather than similar experiences. Analyzing this shows how it creates a reciprocity and complementarity that creates a balance between people since no one knows everything, neither is there one person solely asking questions. The fabric and the thread are tactile and colorful. The needle is sharp, yet used for a calm purpose. There are disagreements around the embroidery table, but people seem also concerned not to stir up conflicts. As a Finnish woman says: when sensitive themes are brought up, you can return to the embroidery, plan your work, sew, and concentrate on the materiality at hand. The embroidery material mediates between events and personal experiences, and makes space to talk in ways that Askins and Pain (2011) term fragile yet hopeful, and helps us take in the complexity of what is going on (Hickey-Moody 2017). Embroidery's monotone rhythm may open emancipatory spaces (Vestby 2015) in the atelier that influences the conversation. It does not invite aggressive, loud voices and quick replies. According to X, embroidery is a peace-building activity, which he has used in areas ridden by war and ethnic conflicts among neighbors, for instance, in his home country Serbia. Maybe the atmosphere also suppresses conflict and limits the opportunities for voicing inequality and disagreements? Or, does the embroidery bring conflicts into smoother terrains? Although Wilson (2013) stresses to plan for 'forces of heated moments' in a workshop on prejudices, the soft materiality and rhythm of embroidering may cushion the interaction as the materiality of embroidering literally gives the participants something soft to hold on to.

The Creative Expression

Abdalla asks Marsil what stitches to use to get the desired expression on his occupied homeland's torn flag. People ask him why he embroiders this. Depending on his mood, and the situation for his family, he sometimes answers briefly, other times more thoroughly, inviting alternating lighter and deeper encounters (Peterson 2017). He gets emotional when he hears and brings forth news about attacks in the areas where his family lives.

The embroidery works as a starting point for Abdalla to talk about important issues. Other participants seem to feel that they are invited to ask about his experiences without fearing seeming to be too direct. It may afford the engagement from others that Abdalla misses. The embroideries, however, vary. Marsil comments on Y's embroidery and says 'sunce'—the word for 'sun' in Serbian. She begins to explain, but realizes that the embroidery has several meanings to her. Yellow, orange and gold could have been the midnight sun, emblematic to Tromsø, but are also her favorite colors, an issue of identity. The shape is inspired by an embroidery made by her mother 40 years ago. Did she embroider this because she had just visited her hometown, or because she associates embroidery with her mother, of which embroidery is far from constitutive? The embroidery contains layers of nontransparent, unspoken bodily memories, of which she brings some into the encounters, whereas embroidery may invite dialogs with other participants, they also, as Vestby (2015) puts it, invites dialog with yourself. Working with art makes everyone artists according to Beuys and Harland (2007). Embroidering may create change, such as self-insight in terms of thinking of oneself in new ways, as we just saw. This can be shared or not in the workshop since the space allows for withdrawal, yet it also creates the potential for engagement and encounters.

A Norwegian woman embroiders a cup of coffee and a cinnamon bun, leading to conversations about their popularity in cafes, turning the talk to cooking, what one eats in different countries, and what food individuals prefer. A young Norwegian man embroidered a heart with the name of the woman he likes, leading to laughter and chats about love and dating. An embroidered flag initiates discussions about nations, resistance, and how Syrian refugees can both have backgrounds from governing majorities and discriminated national minorities. The embroideries include concrete and abstract motifs, variations in intensity, expression, and design. They are beautiful, detailed, simple, and ordinary. We do not analyze them here but emphasize how they introduce different topics to talk about in the workshop, which like the sewing activity, makes it easier to interact among strangers. It invites conversations and initiates engagement and interaction between the participants but does not require a personal response and does not emphasize difference as oppositions, but as variations and fleeting encounters (Hickey-Moody 2017) allowed to be both impersonal and personal. And, it invites gaining new knowledge from people with first-hand experiences.

For Marsil, the embroideries and workshops are art in the sense that "the process of making art and the communication that occurred between the artists [is] an important and integral part of the work itself" (Lazy 1994 in Alfreds & Åberg 2012: 165). Some participants find thinking about themselves in terms of art a bit weird but it also gives a sense of participating in something special. The embroideries have been shown at several exhibitions, with public vernissages opened by a mayor and curators. Perhaps the exhibitions made the participants and audience see embroidery as art? Maybe the public or readers of media coverage became curious about why women and men, of different ages, from different countries, embroider together, introducing a new approach to integration? As discussed in the workshop, X's embroideries on WWII have influenced participants to understand art, embroidery, and war in new ways and part of the change embroidery contributes to. Although being place specific, people of all ages from all over the world may embroider, talk, and share an experience, involved in a social transformation of making a piece of art (Beuys & Harland 2007). In this way socially engaged art can "make complex issues visible, as it communicates through images, icons, feelings, colors, textures and sounds" (Hickey-Moody 2017: 1084). When participants sometimes open up for deeper reflections, they may create a "cosmopolis"—"by connecting humankind with itself" as Balibar (1995: 2) formulated it.

Concluding Comments: Stitching People Together

These workshops have been held over 50 times. We have shown how encounters in the embroidery workshop thrived in balanced spaces, where no single group owned the space and form a majority. We have also shown that embroidery, an unpretentious activity, may put people on an equal footing in participating in something unfamiliar, which may create a space for new experiences.

We argue that embroidering, as an arts-based activity, may facilitate encounters where categories and axes of difference, lighter and deeper moments of community, occur. We have studied how “encounters come to matter” (Valentine & Sadgrove 2012: 2050). However, evaluating the long-term effects would require both longitudinal studies and analyzing people’s mind-set. Our two-and-a-half-year trial research showed the dynamics along the way and how those who still participate in the workshop gain from participation. Following those who did not return would require a more extensive study.

Transformative social interaction may be characterized by an ability and willingness to engage with others, as Abdalla requested in the workshop, and how Mayblin, Valentin, and Winiarska (2016) suggest. We find that when people interact in the workshop, categories become unstable and generate moments of respect and increased knowledge of people, places, belief-systems, and everyday lives. The interaction does not require that people commit themselves; and paradoxically the workshop works as an open space even though it is a highly specific embroidery art space. This space affords shared moments, activity, and gathering, without expectations of connections or commitments to return. This invites fleeting encounters and distant respect. The series of workshops are not dominated by one ethnicity or nationality. Only Marsil is “at home” in the atelier, and no ethnic group defines the space. Questions are asked, different knowledge is sought and answered, experiences and information are shared, balancing relations between people because everybody lacks knowledge on some issues and are able to provide experiences on others. This shows the possibility of maintaining a space without majorities and minorities, yet sustaining people’s uniqueness. Instead of losing “the opportunity to explore those intricate forms of making strange” that Nobles (2013: 32) worries about, it describes how differences are sustained as variations that nurture interaction. The space seems safe and can be termed an everyday situation, in so far that nothing special is taking place there, although not a natural meeting place. The workshop affords some kind of integrative interaction between strangers, which is neither based on nor occurs despite of differences.

We argue that the multilingualism and varieties among the participants, and the ambiguity and openness in the material and the art, introduces themes for conversation, which we analyze as negotiating proximity and distance. The embroideries’ creative expression affords, through memories, ideas, impulses, and their cultural inscription, themes to talk about. They often remove the embarrassment found in situations with strangers, which are regularly imposed by language barriers or lacking themes for conversation. They lubricate conversations that do not require language fluency, whereas the embroidery practice allows participants to retract into their work when needed. The embroidery workshop does not require talk, as the rhythm of embroidering and the music endures. The analysis shows how embroidery may facilitate encounters between strangers and create a form of community, somewhat different from its use in art therapy, identity formations, and cultural and heritage learning. The embroidery workshop as a social sculpture shows that art at its best may be a transformative experience creating new ways of knowing.

Theoretically, we find that the challenges posed by experimental art mainly position participants on an equal footing more than creating insecurity. Some of those who never returned to the workshop may have felt different, or maybe embroidering just felt odd?

The embroidery also affords improvisation and explorations of something new, which Amin (2002) understands as the first step in meaningful encounters. Affordance theory (Gibson 1979/2014) underlines how integrative interaction is conditioned by differences as something everybody possesses and does not constitute somebody as “other.” The analysis supports the importance of safe spaces in encounters, highlighted by Mayblin, Valentine, and Andersson (2016). Though, where they find shared interests a condition for meaningful encounters and “banal sociality,” we find that many participants were not particularly interested in embroidery. Still the workshop enabled a space for “being together,” language training, and forming of a cross-cultural community. The aims were not to obtain similarity and equality, as Amin (2012) warns, but rather that plurality and multiplicity do not make antagonistic oppositions. The art of embroidery facilitates difference as variety and integration of the singular to the multiple plural. While the workshops are grounded on the artist with his Serbian and Syrian background, gathering a highly international group of mobile people together with more settled Norwegians, Sami and Kven people in Tromsø, similar meeting places may be planned in other places and situations. Rather than scaling-up such planned integrative encounters, Wilson (2013: 81) argues that it might be appropriate to discuss multiplying encounters. This analysis shows that participants unknown to each other create a kind of cross-cultural encounter and community. We somehow stitch each other together, remain different, yet transform from the singular to plural.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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